

"THEREFORE CHOOSE LIFE"

A BIOGRAPHICAL  
SKETCH OF

Sarah Chakko

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By HAROLD EHRENSPERGER



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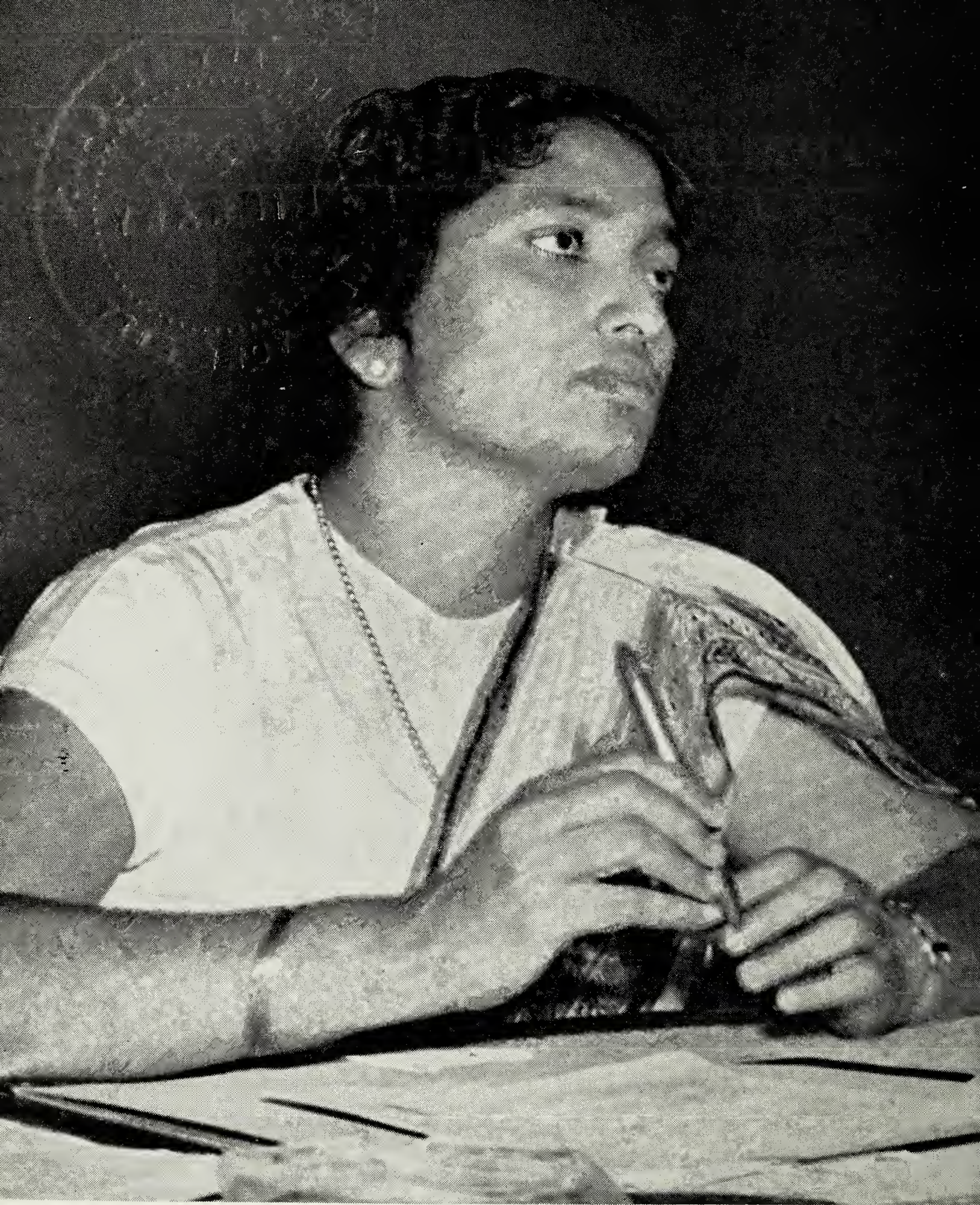
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S A R A H C H A K K O





# Sarah Chakko

Sarah Chakko was born in North Parur, Travancore, India, in 1905. She died in Lucknow, India, on January 25, 1954. She was president of the Isabella Thoburn College in Lucknow, vice-president of the World's Y.W.C.A., one of the presidents of the World Council of Churches of Christ. An Orthodox Syrian Christian by birth, she was chosen to represent The Methodist Church in the World Council of Churches, and by her acceptance of that responsibility aligned herself with members of the younger Christian churches of the world.



*The author wishes to express his appreciation to Miss Florence Salzer and Miss Marjorie Dimmitt, teachers at Isabella Thoburn College and two of Sarah Chakko's closest friends, for much of the material Used in this brief and inadequate account of a truly great person. Parts of this sketch appeared in THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY.*

## ‘ ‘ THEREFORE CHOOSE LIFE ’ ’

The basketball court at Isabella Thoburn College in Lucknow, India, was more than ordinarily crowded. The match was between the Juniors and the staff. Students came out when the staff played, especially to see their principal, Sarah Chakko, play. She was an expert. On this particular day the game was unusually fast. The first quarter passed, and in the few minutes' rest, the spectators were not at all surprised to see Miss Chakko sink to the ground. While the others sat panting, regaining their lost breath, Sarah Chakko lay back, never to rise again. This was on the afternoon of January 25, 1954.

One of the students who was watching remarked after this experience, "Who can help but envy her? What could be more fitting or more fortunate for a grand sport than to breathe her last on the sports field in the midst of a game?" Even her closest friends on the staff felt the same way.

"She died in a way that was characteristic of her," said a teacher who had been very close to her. "She went neatly and quickly, doing a thorough job of it, as she did everything in life. I can't think of a more appropriate place unless it had been in chapel, leading in the Service."

In chapel or on the sports field, Sarah Chakko impressed everyone by her two outstanding characteristics, her poise and her power. As students, townspeople, members of the maintenance staff and the faculty of the college discussed their leader after her death, the two words, "poise" and "power" occurred again and again in their conversation. Along with these words were two other descriptive phrases—"a completely collected personality," and "all of one piece." What were the secrets of her poise and her power, her collected personality that impressed one as being all of one piece?

Her character and personality had been moulded from early childhood through a family life that was almost exemplary, and through an education that gave both depth and breadth to her life. Into the security of a very old and respected Christian family

in North Parur, Travancore, South India, Sarah Chakko was born the 13th of February, 1905, the fifth of ten children. She was preceded and followed by her brothers, George and Jacob, with whom she soon learned to hold her own. To the younger five children of the family she was to play the role of little mother. "As a matter of fact," wrote her older brother George recently, "we were all a little bit scared of Sarah, in awe of her, even the older children." The other children agree that Sarah combined in herself the good qualities of both parents, which was a notable legacy.

## SARAH CHAKKO'S BACKGROUND

Tradition has it that the Mazurancheriparamnath (written with only seven characters in Malayam) family were "direct descendants of an ancient royal family of North Travancore who, together with a score or more Brahmin families, heard the message of the Gospel from the lips of St. Thomas the Apostle himself, and received baptism in the temple pond following some miracle he performed in the royal presence."

Sarah Chakko's father, M. Avara Chakko, was one of the first Christians to be given high office in Cochin, and was for many years the Commissioner of Police and the Commandant of His Highness' Brigade of Guards. He was an able administrator and an outstanding Christian. He was instrumental in starting Union College at Alwaye, one of the unique educational institutions of South India.

Sarah Chakko always looked back to her father's influence as the strongest in her life. Her brother, George, has given a vivid picture of Mr. Chakko with his children. "For most of his official life Papi was circulating officer and was away from home for at least half the month. Papi's homecoming after a period of absence, however short, we children looked forward to, for that was the day he had a world of time for all of us. With uncanny common sense and shrewdness he knew our individual needs and problems and seemed to have plenty of time to attend to them and to play pranks with us. Often Amma (Mother) felt that he was setting a bad example in allowing a let-down from the dig-



nified and 'just-so' attitude she always disciplined us to. On these evenings Father would sit with all his children flocking around him, peeling bananas with his favorite pocket-knife and distributing pieces of them in rotation to each one of us with his own hands. When mangoes were in season he did the same with them. Each one of us felt that Papi loved and understood him or her best; each felt himself to be his favorite."

Mr. Chakko was a pillar of the Orthodox Syrian Church. He worked ceaselessly and spared himself little for the democratization of the church and for peace among the warring elements in it. As a fearless and faithful Christian he prayed much, he dared much, and achieved much. Posterity gave him the name of "Christian Lion."

The church, with its services of two or more hours during which the congregation stood, was a vital part of the children's heritage. Indeed, their life was church-centered, and though Miss Chakko attended the Methodist Church for the last twenty-four years of her life in Lucknow where there was no Syrian Church service and where her work was in a Methodist-Presbyterian College, she never ceased to miss the rich color and meaning of the ritualistic service in which she had grown up, especially in the celebration of Holy Communion. "It is a daily missing," she once said.

Miss Chakko's mother, now seventy-three, was educated privately in Malayam, and in addition to bringing up ten children has kept up in her reading and her concern for current events. "As with the mother of Coriolanus, 'Honor is her family treasure'," one son writes. "She would sooner see her child die in battle than come home dishonored and defeated."

The children were trained to discipline themselves in a family court, carried on in regulation law-court style, with a clerk, a lawyer each for the plaintiff and the defendant, and with a judge whose verdict must be accepted. If the verdict called for corporal punishment it could be administered only by one of the parents, and the switching was always below the knees, out of respect for the culprit's personality. But lesser punishments were administered by the juveniles themselves. So the brother-sister disputes were settled, and at the same time the family ties were

being forged tighter and tighter, the children were gaining experience in fair-mindedness and poised judgment, qualities which were so outstanding in Miss Chakko in maturity.

## EARLY EDUCATION

Sarah Chakko's early education curiously enough was free from any outstanding performances and gave little indication to any one that she was going to be a world figure. Perhaps her being one of a group where all were of high intelligence prevented her from standing out markedly. Like her elder sister, Mary, and her little aunt, she attended what was called the Syrian Girls' School, then the Government Jubilee Girls' High School, both in Trichur. She never failed in any examination but gained few distinctions.

The Chakko children, along with five or six other Christians, were sent to this high school to vindicate the principle that Christians had the same right as Hindus to education in state schools. As a result of this association young Sarah made many friends among the Hindus and learned much from the association which was valuable in helping her to understand the background of many of her students at Isabella Thoburn.

Her religious life while a student in Madras was centered in the little San Thomé Church not far from the famous Roman Catholic Cathedral associated with the name of St. Thomas. With the other Christian students of Queen Mary's College, a government college for girls, she was very regular in her attendance at the morning and evening services. But the major Christian influence was the life and personality of a most outstanding Christian woman, Miss Dorothy de la Haye, principal of the college, whose faith and life constantly inspired the young students.

## THE STUDENT CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT

It was not until her first year of teaching at Isabella Thoburn that a camp experience made Sarah Chakko realize the potentialities of the Student Christian Movement in the life of Indian



students. Later she was to serve for six years as Chairman of the S.C.M. of India, Burma, and Ceylon. This led her to take a prominent part in the World's Student Christian Federation, in which she served as one of India's representatives at an area conference in Java, in 1933, and in San Francisco in 1936, and as one of the team that was sent by the Indian S.C.M. on a Mission of Fellowship to the university students of China in 1947. The conference in Java had significant influence in her Christian commitment.

She was Chairman of the quadrennial conference of the S.C.M. of India, Burma and Ceylon at Kandy, Ceylon, in 1940. As representative of the Indian S.C.M. she served on the National Committee of the Y.W.C.A. of India, Burma and Ceylon. Even when she resigned from the chairmanship of the Indian S.C.M., she continued on the National Committee of the Y.W.C.A. She was elected one of the vice-presidents of the World's Y.W.C.A. in 1947. When someone was needed as chairman of the planning committee of the World Conference of Christian Youth held at Kottayam, South India, in December, 1952, Sarah Chakko was the logical person because of her close connection through the years with these two organizations and the World Council of Churches, and also with the World Council of Christian Education at their convention in Toronto in 1950. Her religion has always been practical. In 1947 she served as chairman of the committee that organized the Delhi School of Social Work, a graduate school affiliated with Delhi University, the first of its kind in India. She served as chairman of its board of directors save during the short period when she was out of the country.

Her "call" to teach was the outcome of a craving for fullness of life for the youth of her country. When she assumed the principalship of the college which she held for nine years, she said that the chief aim of the college could best be expressed in the words of Jesus: "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." "When every student who comes here finds the life abundant," she said in her inaugural address, "the college will have fulfilled its function." To discover the potential strength of each student, to give her direction and

opportunity to develop to the utmost that which is God-given in her, to sense her awareness and enable her to control and curb all that would undermine her usefulness to herself and to society, and to send her forth to pour out this abundant life she has found for the good of mankind—these have been Miss Chakko's aims as an educator.

## CALLED TO TEACH

The call to teach came to Sarah Chakko very early in her life. In 1925, with a group of classmates she was standing on the verandah of Queen Mary's College in Madras. Final examinations were over and the time had come for the seniors to move on to make room for the freshmen. Each girl was telling her hopes and plans for the future. When Sarah Chakko's turn came, it suddenly became clear to her what she wanted to do with her life. "I want to be an educator," she said, and she meant it. Twenty-five years later, in her inaugural address as president of Isabella Thoburn College, she remembered that night. "I had never thought about it before. I know full well that my parents had other plans for me. But somehow, at that moment, I knew exactly what I wanted to do. It took me three years to convince my family that my desire to teach was not a passing whim."

The call to teach took her to one of the oldest girls' schools in India, the Bentinck High School of Madras. "I believe God took a hand in my affairs, for the principal was one of the most progressive educators in India. Her school was run according to a modified Dalton Plan, and as I look back on it I realize that she was probably glad to have an untrained, raw graduate who was eager to learn her profession. Every night at dinner we had an informal discussion on various educational theories, and in the daytime I had my practical training in dealing with teenage girls." Two years of this and one difficult year helping to start a girls' school at Alwaye in Travancore only made her fall in love with her job instead of curing her of her peculiar malady, the "call to teach."

She returned to Madras to equip herself for her work. In 1930 she received her Master's Degree from Presidency College, and



in July of that year she began her teaching career at Isabella Thoburn College in Lucknow. She became progressively one of the hostel wardens, the hostel superintendent, vice-principal of the college, and finally, in 1945, the principal. During her first sabbatical leave from the College she chose to concentrate on courses of education at the University of Chicago in order to be able to evaluate the current educational ideas in India, which she instinctively questioned. She received a Master's Degree in education in 1937. The following year, as a Barbour Scholar at the University of Michigan, she studied international law and colonialism. She wanted to understand the basis of world tensions and the part international law could play in bringing about world peace. Her second sabbatical leave was spent in research on the Madras Judicial Records. Realizing the need of Christians in India to understand the fundamentals of Christian faith in order to distinguish between the essentials and non-essentials of the faith, she planned to spend her third sabbatical leave in the study of theology. But she accepted the invitation of the World Council as Secretary of the Commission on the Life and Work of Women in the Church instead, because she saw the advantage of a practical approach to theology through day-to-day working relationship with current theologians of our times.

## SARAH CHAKKO AND SPORTS

Her subjects as a teacher have been at various times Indian history, economics, politics and, as a pinch-hitter, physical education. Her interest in games not only contributed to her excellent health but also kept her human and in personal contact with students. On her busiest days she took time out to play with students on the sports field. The girls are fond of saying that she played with "all her soul." She was a "crack" tennis player, played catcher in American-introduced softball, and also excelled as forward in basketball, an asset that stood her in good stead when there were faculty-student matches. She believed in faculty participation in sports because she knew that the comradeship between faculty members and students was invaluable. "She would usually stand on the Naunihal (stairs)," wrote one

of the students recently, "facing the volley ball court, never too busy to return each greeting with a sincere and heart-warming smile. After roll call, she would referee one of the games. I loved to play in the game which she refereed, because somehow, her very presence spurred me on to do my best. She made us forget ourselves and always emphasized—oh, so often in words, 'Play the game for the game's sake, never your own.' Being the wonderful sport she was, Miss Chakko encouraged us never to be unsporting, even for a moment. She was so much closer to us on the sports field than she was anywhere else. Every evening she would be moving actively from field to field, now with a volley ball in her hand, now explaining the latest rules in baseball, and yet again joining in for a set of tennis."

For all her many intimate friends, congenial family members, and her constant companionship with people within and without the College who had mutual interests and ideals, she was spiritually lonely, as perhaps all great souls are. She was bearing so much that she had no right to share with others—personal confidences of uncounted persons, the inner affairs of various organizations, and her own college. This bore heavily upon her; for she was by nature open, frank, confiding, eager to get the counsel of others. "It doesn't matter who I am with," she said once, "I can get along with anybody, and I live in world of my own, anyway." The marvel was that she gave no appearance of withdrawal, nor of loneliness, but was always reaching out to fulfill others' needs.

"I am reminded so much of her greatness we took for granted because we had lived closely with her," wrote Dr. Mary E. Shannon, ex-principal of the College. "We had seen it grow over the years. We could not always say, 'This greatness came to life here—that experience enriched her understanding—this thing and that developed certain qualities in her.' She was all of one piece but the pattern was beautified with the experiences she so happily and fully accepted as the piece was made . . . The greatest thing that I was permitted to do was to find Sarah and bring her to the College. The next greatest, I guess, was to have sense enough to come home and stay here! I was so sure the time had come when there must be Indian leadership . . . and the years, I think,



have justified my judgment. Sarah would have been a wonderful woman anywhere, but I can't help thinking the College did give her a chance."

## ISABELLA THOBURN COLLEGE

Miss Chakko herself was conscious that it was the particular conditions of Isabella Thoburn College that stimulated her growth. Coming to it at only twenty-four she was still mouldable. Freely she gave credit to older faculty members for shaping her attitudes. "I'm just an ordinary person," she said lately to a friend, "in later years forced by circumstances to do various things in public." She was utterly sincere in thinking herself ordinary, while at the same time she had intelligence and honesty enough to know that she had this and that native power and that she was trusted with responsibilities because people had found her worthy of trust. Several times she said of some honor, "There's nothing personal about it. It's because I'm an Indian woman that I'm chosen." Her sense of humor kept reminding her of how few competitors she had among Oriental women in leadership; her innate modesty and sensible home training kept her from realizing she would have easily come to the top in any group of men or women anywhere in the world.

It was interesting to watch her in a group meeting. She usually sat knitting quietly, not speaking up if there was someone else who could make the contribution needed. When there was not she was on her feet and in a few quiet words going right to the heart of the matter. She had a genius for seizing upon the relevant and discarding all else. The members of the Christian Council of Uttar Pradesh were delighted with her at a meeting in 1952 when the Premier of the Province had addressed them and she rose to reply to his long address. She answered to every point of his with which she had agreed, and then in masterly style she took all the points of his arguments with which the Christian Council would not agree and answered them brilliantly, convincingly, in the order in which he had presented them—without a note, without any hesitation! Intellectually she could compete with the best.

Her family, too, feel that her coming to Isabella Thoburn College was God-guided. "The hand of God directed her eventually into a field where in the midst of kindly, appreciative, sensitive and God-loving people," her brother George writes, "she found the best soil in which her innate qualities matured, ripened and mellowed into the full fruit that we saw of her. We are all agreed in our recent discussions in the family that in any other environment than that of Chand Bagh<sup>1</sup> Sarah's potential qualities of head and heart would not have blossomed forth into the loveliness that we have seen these last few years."

Sarah Chakko was uncompromising in what she considered sound principle. When a parent was beseiging her to admit a girl who was too young, she remained adamant about not admitting her. The parent was disappointed, but when he left he said, "You have bucked me all along. I wish I had your spunk." To which Miss Chakko replied, "This is not a question of spunk. This is a question of right and wrong." Students as well as staff recognized her unflinching loyalty to right as she saw it, and they respected her for it.

## THE PHILOSOPHY OF A CHRISTIAN COLLEGE

She believed that the Christian witness is best borne in India in a community where not merely the spoken word but also day-to-day living witnesses to Christ's way of life. The fact that the inspiration of a God-centered life is caught rather than taught makes a small student body desirable. Miss Chakko kept the college small so that it did not exceed 350. Its teachers in addition to being experts in their fields were called upon to strive to live in the Christian life in community with people of all types of social and cultural backgrounds.

The same conception of community living permeates the maintenance staff for whom Miss Chakko had from her first coming to the college a vision of dignity and self-respect. When she took office as principal one of her first concerns was to help them organize their own self-government association modeled on the ancient Indian village pattern. All men and women employees of the college are members of this **panchayat\***, and are responsible to

\*A small governing body on the compound.

<sup>1</sup>Campus of the College.



their elected officers for their own discipline, work, and welfare. Thus they receive training in democratic procedures so important for the new India. The vitality of their sense of belongingness was illustrated at the 60th anniversary of the college, in 1947, when they raised a voluntary contribution far beyond their financial ability. When refugees from Pakistan poured into India and Miss Chakko called upon the students to raise funds to succor the needy, the maintenance staff felt hurt because they were not asked to make similar sacrifices. This indicated how much a part they considered themselves to be in the total campus picture.

Sarah Chakko thought that much of the trouble that Christians experience in India is due to a failure to discriminate between what is significant and what is not, where it is right to make compromises and where not. To stand firm and unrelenting for what is important, and to compromise on what is unimportant was one of the basic tenets of her life. When Christians questioned the government use of figures of Hindu dieties on a new stamp issue without realizing that in the eyes of a secular state they represent only the artistic heritage of the past, not dieties to be worshipped, she took their objection lightly. When they got excited over the understandable lack of respect for Sunday as a Christian holiday she was not disturbed, for she believed that such omissions can be rectified by tactful handling. When, for instance, the Convocation of Lucknow University was set on the sixteenth of the month, which happened to be Sunday, she called the Vice-Chancellor to request that the date be changed. "Is the sixteenth a Sunday?" he asked. There had been no intention to offend the Christians. It was merely an oversight and the Vice-Chancellor was willing to change the date because he knew that Miss Chakko only protested when the reason was important. "Don't make demands you can't justify," has been one of the pieces of advice she always gave to her staff.

The Christian purpose of the college has never been seriously threatened, even though in a rapidly changing age necessary adjustments to new national ideals and plans call for adaptability, wisdom, and firmness. Sarah Chakko believed that as long as the college meets the basic needs of the people of India it will have a key position in women's education.

## SARAH CHAKKO'S GRACE

She had an instinctive graciousness and tact born of her ability to put herself in other people's places. Once on the occasion of the Hindu spring festival of **Holi** the college gates had been closed to keep out the crowds of men prowling the streets to throw colored water and powder on passersby, an integral part of the festival. While the staff was at luncheon in the faculty house, a shouting mob of men students burst open the gates and pushed in. Jubilant over the commotion they had created in a neighboring women's dormitory, they had come bringing buckets of colored water to have similar fun at the expense of the college girls. The staff went tense with anxiety, remembering past unpleasantness during this festival. Miss Chakko calmly rose from the table and went out to greet the color-splashed rabble. "Come in, gentlemen," she said.

A stunned silence fell on the crowd. Then one student spoke up, "We have come to bring you **Holi** greetings."

"Come on in. I'm sorry I don't have any sweets for you; I did not expect such a crowd. We are just having lunch and I have only bread left."

"We will have that as a symbol of friendship," the leader answered. So he solemnly ate a piece of dry bread from the plate she brought, then asked if he might put a bit of color on her forehead as their greeting. She acquiesced. When they asked for permission to throw color on the girls they accepted Miss Chakko's suggestion that since they would not care to have strangers greet their own sisters in this manner they should not embarrass other people's sisters. But one fellow shouted, "Why did you shut the gates?"

"Oh, that was to keep rowdies out, not you gentlemen," she answered. The crowd roared with laughter and went away.

Sarah Chakko's staff shared the students' respect for her. They worked happily with her, confident that she was adequate in brain and culture, in vision and self-dedication, to be one of a worthy line of principals of Isabella Thoburn College. They appreciated how much of the fine spirit of the college was due to her careful planning. Her real testing came from her daily life in



the faculty house, with the same living conditions and the same salary as the youngest permanent teacher. There she proved herself open in character, warm in personal relationships. She was a good comrade, with the light touch and the sweetness of nature that made her attractive to all. It was her faculty housemates who had the best chance to see the source of her power as revealed in nightly family prayers, it was they who were most conscious of her compassion, which was perhaps her most appreciated gift to others.

This compassion broke through her firmness. At any hour of the day or night she would leave business or rest to help solve another's problems. All sorts of people besides those on the campus knew this and brought to her their difficulties, whether of finances, personal relationships, griefs and hurts, or plans for the future. Her sense of "call" to teach made her accessible to students. Each one who came to her office for anything whatsoever was a "call" to her to do something to meet a need. This is particularly clear in the disciplinary measures she had to take from time to time. While she was strict, she tried to get at the basic need and to heal where there were hurts. Scarcely ever did she give a flat "no" to anyone, because she tried to see a way out. A few years ago one group of students who were very fond of her dubbed her "the diplomat" because they noted this quality in her. (Her nickname with the present student generation was "Chacks.")

## SARAH CHAKKO'S COMPASSION

Parents and guardians found in her this same quality of compassion. She would refuse to admit a student but she would not let a disappointed parent leave without making suggestions as to the other avenues open to the young person. The vice-principal of the college, Miss Ava Hunt, recalls many instances exemplified by one parent who went away happy and excited about the possibilities opened up to his daughter and not at all perturbed by the refusal of admission. Each day's events were a part of the total call for the training of young women.

## SARAH CHAKKO AND THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

When Miss Chakko got a letter from Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam asking her to be a delegate to the organizing assembly of the World Council of Churches at Amsterdam in 1948, she told him that she was not a Methodist, that she was a member of the Orthodox Syrian Church of Malabar. That did not matter. It was Sarah Chakko that was wanted, not a Syrian, or a Methodist or any other denominational representative.

Before she accepted the invitation to The World Council Assembly, however, she consulted her Orthodox Bishop, who gave her the unorthodox permission to go to the meeting. Later some question was raised by denominationalists as to what exactly she represented at Amsterdam, a question that was rather difficult to answer since delegates came as representatives, not as individuals. She felt that the people who complained were right in principle. "That kind of thing seems to happen to me all the time," she said. "Somehow I do not fit into the right categories for purposes of classification."

Attendance at the Amsterdam meeting had many results. Delegates remember Miss Chakko for her independent thinking, for the way in which she stood up to some of the European theologians. Not being a theologian herself she was unabashed in her insistence on knowing what they were talking about. It also led to her appointment as Chairman of the World Council Commission on the Life and Work of Women in the Church. The survey preparatory to the work of this Commission is now published as **The Service and Status of Women in the Churches**.

She enjoyed telling of the fear she felt before her speech in Amsterdam, in 1948. Up to the evening before she was due to speak she had no leading as to what she should say. She had been praying fervently for guidance. Then when necessity was upon her she took her pen, rapidly wrote her thoughts and asked her roommate, "Do you think that will do?" As she went to the microphone the next day John R. Mott said kindly, "Just say what is in your heart, child. It will be all right." It was. The whole Assembly took account of this fresh voice and viewpoint from the



Orient. Both womanhood and the younger churches took a step forward in world esteem.

Her year of furlough spent with the World Council of Churches in Geneva, as Chairman of the Commission on the Life and Work of Women in the Church, was one of the richest in her life. During the wide travel it involved she gave of herself freely in a heavy schedule of speaking. Her eager eyes missed little, and she let the iron of all the suffering and fear and frustration she witnessed twist within her soul. She was haunted afterwards by memories her colleagues at the College could share only vicariously. An incident in the Holy Land seared deepest of all. She was one of a group to meet with a large number of Arabs, dislocated, rebellious, and restless to be returned to their homes. Miss Chakko was the one pushed forward by her comrades to be spokesman; they, sore-hearted, would take it from her, an Oriental, who knew what it was to have been under foreign rule. That group was one of the many burdens she carried in her heart afterwards.

She wrote from Geneva to a friend in India on March 3, 1950, just after she had started her new work with the World Council of Churches: "I am scared at all that lies ahead . . . All the past S.C.M. and Y.W.C.A. and World Council connections are certainly going to be a great asset. I see how step by step God had led me into taking on this job and I pray that this job will make my task in Chand Bagh more meaningful. Somehow I feel that years ago when I went to the first Sat Tal camp a certain process in my preparation was started, and it is only now it is beginning to show me which way He is leading. If I had seen today at that time all would have been spoilt. There is much in the day-to-day choices placed before one. 'Today I place before thee life and death; therefore choose life.' How true and how wise!"

In a seminar sponsored jointly by the World Council of Christian Education, The Sunday School Association and the World Student Christian Federation, held in Toronto, Canada, in 1950, she served as Chairman. The report of that seminar is printed under the title, **The Church College**.

She was elected one of the six presidents of the World Council of Churches in 1951. This singular honor came to her as a repre-

sentative of the churches in the Orient. It was peculiarly important because she was the first woman to be elected as well as the first Indian. To those who saw her during the meeting of the General Committee of the World Council of Churches at Isabella Thoburn in December, 1952, Sarah Chakko was the personification of grace and poise, attending to minute details of hospitality as well as welcoming the Prime Minister and the Vice-President of the Indian Republic. On the last day of the meetings a glowing tribute was paid to her, for she became the wonder woman of the Committee and the ideal person to represent Indian womanhood in this significant group. She had brought the Committee of world-famous men and women to the College and had acted as hostess through the historic meeting.

## **SARAH CHAKKO AND THE CHURCH**

In a letter written in August, 1952, she explained her ideas about the relationship between the churches of the East and West.

“I think we make a great mistake when we let the conceptions of the secular world, especially ideas of nationalism, affect our ideas about the church. In the sight of God His church is one. We ought to see the church as the New Testament sees her, as a unit and not in bits and pieces. This conception will cut across attitudes held by many in the East and West. I used to see the church in nationalist compartments and I realize now what that perversion did for me. When one begins to think of the church as the body of those who love the Lord located geographically in different parts of the world, petty national divisions, superiority-inferiority attitudes, disappear. One does not then argue about money from the West and the controls which tend to follow money. Instead, one begins to think in terms of stewardship and the needs of the church universal in many parts of the world. Giving then ceases to be the gift of the Western churches to the churches of the East or vice versa, but an attempt to meet the need of God’s children everywhere in the most affective way possible. There is no giving or receiving; there is only the using of God’s gifts to each to the maximum advantage of all.



“This is not to run away from the facts of geography and political controls, but to give these realities only the relevance they ought to have. It is true that very often people in a particular locality who know the local situation are the best judges of the needs and the way of meeting such needs most satisfactorily. Relations with the government of each region may perhaps be best maintained by the citizens of that country. In such cases matters of policy may be best left to the people of the country. But the Christian strategy in all these matters should be governed by the vision of the total world task, with peculiarities of local circumstances receiving due consideration. It is when the church looks at God’s creation through eyes dominated by the secular concepts of race or nation, or takes an ant’s-eye view of the world that questions emerge. My plea is that instead of adjudicating between missionary domination and national domination all of us learn to see ourselves in the larger perspective of the whole and drop the pettiness of our present arguments on this subject.”

To Sarah Chakko the thought of the church as ecumenical was inevitable. Some branches were older, some younger; some under special obligation because of special lack of experience or resources in money and leadership. But to her they were all literally one family in Christ, no one member stooping to another either in benevolence or in servility.

Her last talk in the College chapel on January 20, 1954, was fascinating to the students. “She talked about the dimensions of life,” a student writes. “She said we know of three dimensions, length, breadth, and height, and mathematicians have found a fourth one. There might even be a fifth dimension. All at once at the fifth dimension my thinking was directed to the life after death. Miss Chakko knows the fifth dimension of life now!”

## WORSHIP

Worship lay at the core of Sarah Chakko’s life; it was the fountainhead of all her being. Thence she drew her poise, her vision, her power. On the first page of her **Book of Worship**, published by the Methodist Church, she wrote this quotation from William Temple: “The world can be saved by one thing only and

that is worship. For to worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purposes of God."

She knew her way in that **Book of Worship** as she did in her **Bible. The Methodist Hymnal** was their companion-piece. She knew it from cover to cover and was up to the last night of her life asking the group to try this or that hymn unfamiliar to them. For the Communion Service at the College Day of Retreat on January 26th she had had mimeographed all the many stanzas of that ancient hymn used in her own Syrian service, "Let all mortal flesh keep silence."

She could not abide the shallow habit of singing just any two or three stanzas of a hymn. To her a hymn was worship offered up to God, worship with a developed and complete thought-pattern. Never was less than the whole of a hymn sung in Isabella Thoburn College; it would have seemed just as bad to skip parts of the Lord's Prayer. Her colleagues and students remember how often she called for some specially favorite hymns: "Immortal, invisible, God only wise," and St. Francis' song of praise, "All creatures of our God and King," "O young and fearless prophet," "This is my Father's World," and, "Be still my soul." On the Saturday night previous to her death on Monday the teachers living in the **Kothi** (faculty house) had lingered on around the drawing-room fire after family prayers, singing hymns till bedtime. It was a beautiful fellowship; nobody seemed to want to break off the singing. Miss Chakko asked for number after number, among them several of the ancient hymns and canticles at the back of the book. She loved dignified church music, and rebelled against cheap swinging tunes to accompany thoughts of God.

The annual Sports Day of the College was held this year on February 12th. Miss Chakko had helped to organize the different events with the Student Athletic Committee. It was appropriate, therefore, that the day was dedicated with a short service to her memory before the first match of the day began on the basketball court. The Athletic Chairman, a sophomore, opened the day with the following remarks:



“Today is a day which is considered one of the happiest days of this college. But this year there is something in all our minds which gives us the feeling of having lost something most precious to us. Of course, it is Miss Chakko. But we should enjoy today and be happy as she would have liked us to be. Though she is not here, her spirit is with us. And so, I hope all of you will carry on as though her spirit is with us every moment. She was a champion of everything, including games. We remember her sportsmanship, and we all must remember to achieve her high sportsmanship in our games field today and always. This year she was more with us, as she had taken a lot of interest in games. This is therefore rightly her day, and so we are dedicating Sports Day to Miss Chakko. I hope all the members of Chand Bagh family will make the best of this day.”

## THE MASTER MOTIVE

In spite of her world-wide contacts and commitments Sarah Chakko saw her greatest opportunity in her daily tasks. She did not consider working on a committee for a world convention, attending an executive committee as a president of the World Council of Churches, or speaking in Madison Square Garden (as she had) of greater importance than helping some individual with a personal problem. Her success as a world leader and as the executive of one of India's most important educational institutions was the outcome of natural growth resulting from listening for and obedience to the call. She is an admirable illustration of Hugo Munsterberg's definition of character: **the capacity to keep a master-motive dominant.**

Her close associates at Isabella Thoburn feel that Sarah Chakko illustrated what Phillips Brooks meant by those oft-quoted and almost hackneyed lines: “Do not pray for tasks equal to your strength. Pray for powers equal to your tasks. Then the doing of your work shall be no miracle. But you shall be a miracle. Every day you shall wonder at yourself, at the richness of life which has come to you by the grace of God.” The first representative from India and the first woman president of the World Council of Churches had a life that may seem to many people a

miracle. What made people wonder at her as a person, at the richness of life that had come to her, is no secret. It was to be found in her keeping her eyes open to daily tasks and in her praying constantly for strength to meet them.

For the Convocation Memorial Service at the College on January 29, 1954, Eva Shipstone, one of the Indian members of the staff, wrote a recollection of her principal in the form of a litany which closed with what many think is the epitome of Sarah Chakko.

*“Whose dimensions in life are not to be measured in terms of length of years, but in terms of depth and quality. Whose wisdom and beauty of spirit drew richly from God Himself, and who interpreted so realistically the mind and spirit of Jesus Christ.”*



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